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Suspension of recruitment for posts in the General Service and related categories

Third report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. Introduction

1. The Advisory Committee has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the suspension of recruitment for posts in the General Service and related categories (A/60/363). During its consideration of the report the Advisory Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification.

II. Suspension of recruitment of General Service and related categories

2. In its resolution 58/270 of 19 March 2004 (para. 25), the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to suspend recruitment action for new vacancies in General Service posts for the biennium 2004-2005, with the exception of safety and security personnel and editorial assistants (text processors) in language functions, and to report on the progress made and on the impact of those measures in the context of his performance reports. In his first performance report on the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 (A/59/578, para. 42), the Secretary-General indicated that a report would be submitted to the General Assembly in the latter part of 2005 recommending the lifting of the suspension of recruitment of General Service staff for the remainder of the biennium. Having taken note of the Secretary-General's intention, the General Assembly requested that a comprehensive report on this issue be submitted at the beginning of the sixtieth session (resolution 59/276, sect. VIII, para. 7). The report under consideration (A/60/363) has been submitted in response to this request.

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3. The Advisory Committee notes that the Secretary-General recommends that the suspension of recruitment in the General Service and related categories be lifted with effect from 1 December 2005, which would allow a lead time for advertising and processing vacancies without affecting the budget for the current biennium (A/60/363, para. 16). The proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007 has been established based on a vacancy rate of 1.5 per cent for the General Service category, in anticipation of the lifting of the suspension of recruitment.

4. The report of the Secretary-General describes a number of difficulties arising from the suspension of recruitment for posts in the General Service and related categories (see A/60/363, paras. 7-11). The Secretary-General stresses in particular the difficulties reported in filling vacancies for specialized staff due to the shortage of qualified candidates and the frequent need to advertise more than once. The Committee also recalls that this difficult issue had been raised by some programme managers during the budget consideration process. The Committee requested additional information on the specialized functions, the number of posts involved and their distribution across departments, but was informed that this information was not readily available. The Committee was provided with a list of functional titles used within the General Service and related categories under the regular budget, derived from the Integrated Management Information System (IMIS). The list includes over 400 functional titles grouped broadly under secretarial and non-secretarial functions. The Advisory Committee was informed that a detailed review of General Service functions and ratios relative to Professional staff was under way (see also para. 11 below).

5. **The Advisory Committee points out that the narrative of the report, emphasizing disruptions due to the recruitment freeze, is not always supported by the data presented. For example, paragraph 10 of the Secretary-General's report refers to the difficulty in maintaining staffing levels due to lack of experienced candidates under Humanitarian assistance, inter alia, whereas the annex to that report shows that there were no vacant posts among General Service staff in this section as of 31 July 2005. Furthermore, the large number of vacant posts under Safety and security is presented as a factor, whereas Safety and security has, in fact, been exempted from the freeze.**

6. The Advisory Committee notes that short-term interim measures taken by departments to mitigate the effects of the suspension of recruitment of staff in the General Service and related categories have been the utilization of overtime and of individual contractors, the reprioritization of tasks and the transfer of some functions to Professional staff, among others.

7. **The Committee notes with concern that the report of the Secretary-General enumerates the problems encountered and the application of interim solutions, with little or no analysis of the important issues under consideration, nor of the lessons to be learned from this exercise. The Advisory Committee is of the opinion that, through this measure, the General Assembly intended to stimulate the search for creative and practical solutions for optimizing the utilization of available resources, as well as the longer-term planning for the modernization and streamlining of administrative processes, including the proper application of information technology, in order to release resources from administrative functions and redeploy them to substantive areas. In this connection, the Advisory Committee recalls its previous reports (A/58/7, para.**

143; A/60/7, para. 53) in which it had called upon the Secretary-General to be creative in the management of staff. In the case at hand, for example, the creation of a pool of staff with a variety of skills used across all sections that could then be deployed to departments dynamically to meet changing requirements and peak workloads might have been explored.

8. In its review of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007, the Committee stated its view that the suspension of General Service recruitment across the board might have been too broad a measure. It also recommended that the suspension of the recruitment of General Service staff should be lifted (A/60/7, paras. 82 and 83).

9. **However, having considered the current report of the Secretary-General, the Committee is of the opinion that it would be premature to approve the Secretary-General's proposal to lift the suspension of recruitment as of 1 December 2005 while the comprehensive analysis of the functions performed by the General Service staff is still under way. Whether or not the freeze is continued past its scheduled termination date of 31 December 2005, the Advisory Committee recommends that the Secretary-General prepare a plan of action on the way forward. In this regard, the Committee requests that a comprehensive list of specialized functions be established expeditiously by the Office of Human Resources Management, based on the list of functions provided to the Committee. The Advisory Committee firmly believes that it is incumbent upon the Secretary-General to propose ways and means for selectively eliminating General Service posts whenever and wherever possible.**

III. Ratio of General Service posts to Professional posts

10. The Advisory Committee has commented on the proposed abolition of 92 posts in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007 (A/60/7 and Corr.1, para. 81) and on the concurrent increase in extrabudgetary General Service staff, which rose from 4,568 in 2002-2003 to 5,634 in 2004-2005. A further increase to 6,306 is proposed for 2006-2007. **It is therefore not clear to what extent the reduction of the number of General Service posts is due to efficiency gains.**

11. The Advisory Committee notes that a consultant has been engaged to carry out a review of the ratio of General Service staff to Professional staff, in response to the concerns of the General Assembly on the high proportion of General Service posts to Professional posts in the regional commissions (General Assembly resolution 56/253, para. 72), as well as its own recommendation that a comprehensive analysis of the functions performed by the General Service staff be carried out with a view to determining accurately which posts could be eliminated without detriment to the work of the Organization (A/60/7, para. 83).

12. During its discussions with the representatives of the Secretary-General, the Advisory Committee was informed that the first draft of the report of the consultant would be issued by the end of October 2005. It would contain, inter alia, an analysis of the composition and functions of General Service staff, the evolution of these functions and trends over time, the differences between duty stations, the impact of information technology and an evaluation of the best practices of organizations similar to the United Nations.

13. **The Advisory Committee looks forward to reviewing the comprehensive analysis of General Service functions, which is long overdue. However, it is of the opinion that such a study should have been done in-house, in cooperation with the Office of Internal Oversight Services. Such an analysis should not be viewed simply as another report to be submitted, but as an essential step in the ongoing process of streamlining and modernizing administrative processes of the United Nations. It is the view of the Committee that the process of carrying out this analysis in-house would have led to a greater knowledge of the specificities of various departments and processes, thus facilitating the formulation of proposals for creative, workable solutions. The insight and expertise acquired during the analysis would be valuable throughout the implementation phase. Internal capacity should therefore be strengthened, through training and occasional support from external experts when necessary.**

IV. Conclusion

14. The Advisory Committee has consistently urged improved efficiency and cost-effectiveness as well as the streamlining of administrative processes and the greater use of information and communication technologies to automate repetitive tasks. The Office of Internal Oversight Services has also made recommendations for the development of a time-bound plan for reducing duplication, complexity and bureaucracy in administrative processes and procedures (A/58/211, sect. VI). **The Advisory Committee is convinced that there remains a great potential for improving productivity, thus releasing considerable resources that could be used more effectively on programme activities.**

15. **The Advisory Committee recognizes that a number of measures for improvement have been taken over the years. A number of useful studies on administrative functions have also been carried out. However, it agrees with the Office of Internal Oversight Services that it is necessary to adopt a systemic, enterprise-wide approach that is designed to meet the needs of the entire Organization. The Committee recommends that the comprehensive analysis of General Service functions take into account the recommendations of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (A/58/211, sect. VI) and be prepared in a manner that would allow it to be used as an input for the development of the time-bound plan (see para. 14 above).**